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THE WILLIAMSON COUNTY GIANT (*aka* A PLEISTOCENE MEGA-HUMAN)

Kevin E. Smith

Giants and pygmies have been of sideshow interest for millennia, so it is perhaps not surprising that this fascination was extended to include the search for prehistoric examples. The early discovery of just such an enormous skeleton seven miles from Franklin achieved brief national prominence as documented in the period newspapers.

> *Jeffersonian Republican* (Stroudsburg, PA), 2 Oct 1845, pg. 1. **A Story of A Giant.** In exhuming of late the remains of so many wonderfully large animals unknown to the present age, it has been supposed that the ancient race of men must have been correspondingly large. At length we have something to sustain the doctrine. The Madison Banner states on the most reliable authority, that a person in Franklin county [*sic*], Tennessee, while digging a well, a few weeks since, found a human skeleton, at the depth of fifty feet, which measures eighteen feet in length. The immense frame was entire with an unimportant exception in one of the legs. It has been visited by several of the principal members of the medical faculty in Nashville, and pronounced unequivocally, by all, the skeleton of a huge man. The bone of the thigh measured five feet; and it was computed that the height of the living man, making the proper allowance for muscles, must have been at least twenty feet. The finder has been offered eight thousand dollars for it, but had determined not to sell it at any price until exhibiting it for twelve months. He is now having the different parts wired together for this purpose. These unwritten records of the men and animals of other ages, that are often from time to time dug out of the bowels of the earth, put conjecture to confusion, and almost surpass imagination itself. History informs us that the Emperor Maximum was 8 feet 6 inches in height. In the reign of Claudius a man was brought from Arabia 9 feet 9 inches tall. John Middleton, of Lancashire, England, was 9 feet 3 inches, and Cotter, the Irish Giant, 8 feet 7 inches. But our American skeleton, if we have really found such a one, will throw all other Giants in the shade.

Version of this story -- frequently with the title "A GIANT AT LAST" -- were printed between 30 Sep 1845 and 3 Oct 1845 in the Boston Mail, the St. Albans Republican, the Burlington Free Press, and the Northern Galaxy. Closer to home, the *Western Weekly Review* (Franklin) published the "real story" on 11 Nov 1845:

> **GIANTS BONES**.-- There have been recently dug up in Williamson county, Tennessee, seven miles from Franklin, the bones of a giant and no mistake. We have conversed with an intelligent and enterprising gentleman of our city, who has seen, examined, and purchased an interest in the skeleton. From him we derive the following facts: A Mr. Shumate was boring for water near his residence, upon a hill of considerable extent and eminence, situated in a rocky, mountainous section country, where the bones were discovered about 60 feet beneath the surface. They were immediately exhumed, and were found embedded in a strata of the hardest kind of clay which had apparently filled an extensive cavern or opening in the rock. The position of the skeleton was that of a recumbent, making an angle of the horizon. The bones are not at all petrified as in the case with most of the skeleton monsters of animals which have been discovered in our country, but are, nevertheless, in a most perfect state of preservation, and weigh in the aggregate about 1500 pounds!
>
> No doubt rests in the minds of any who have seen or examined them, that these bones belong to the *genus homo*. All the larger and characteristic bones are entire, and the skull, arms and thigh bones, knee pans, shoulder sockets and collar bones remove all skepticism as to their humanity. The whole skeleton, we are informed, is about 18 feet high , and must have stood full 19 feet 'in his stockings' (*if he wore any.*). The bones of the thigh and leg measure 6 feet 6 inches, so that our friend,, 'the General,' could have marched erect, in full military costume, between the giant's legs.
>
> The skull is described as being about 2-3 the size of a flour barrel, and capable of holding in its cavities near two bushels; a coffee cup of good size could be put into the eye sockets-- and the jaw teeth, which are all perfect even to the enamel, would weight from 3 1-2 to 6 pounds, some of the smaller ones which were loose have been weighed -- the front teeth are missing.-- These teeth bear the evidence of extreme age, from their cavities are apparent diminution from use in wearing away.
>
> An eminent physician and anatomist, properly assisted, is engaged in having the skeleton put together and the small deficiencies supplied by art.

Williamson County Giant, continued....

We are further informed by our fellow citizen, who has purchased an interest of one fourth in this interesting and wonderful curiosity, that it will be ready for exhibition in about one month's time, when it will start on its tour thro' the civilized world, and proceeding from New Orleans will shortly be among us here. Our fellow townsman keeps the price he paid for his interest a secret, but says that $50,000 has been offered and refused for the whole of this curiosity.

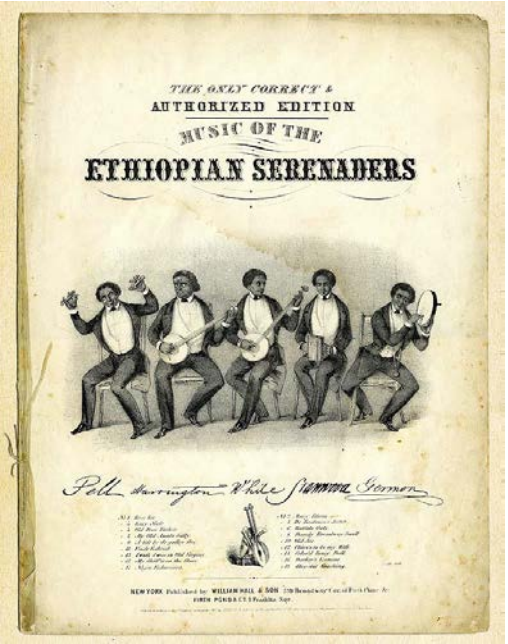


FIGURE 1. "Music of the Ethiopian Serenaders."

The owner and/or entrepreneur who purchased an interest in the skeleton was apparently well connected politically. In 1846, public exhibitions were assessed a flat rate tax of $50.00. The argument was put forward to the state legislature that scientific and artistic exhibitions should be exempted from that tax -- all in the interests of stimulating High Culture among Tennessee citizens. This led to a lengthy debate in the Senate and House throughout November over how to word such an exemption such as in the House where "Mr. Guild thought the bill impolitic. The expression 'scientific exhibitions,' was too general, and he thought every show would be considered scientific. He thought the Ethiopian Serenaders might be considered a scientific exhibition. It was certainly the most scientific exhibition he ever saw" ("Tennessee Legislature. Exhibitions of Skeletons, of Sculpture and Paintings," *Republican Banner* 19 Nov 1845). The Ethiopian Serenaders were a blackface minstrel troupe that gained popularity after their performance for President John Tyler at the White House in 1844 -- their tour included Nashville in 1845, before departing for a lengthy and successful international tour of England (Figure 1). After considerable debate of this sort, acceptable wording was hashed out and the exhibition of skeletons and fossils became a tax-free event in Tennessee:

An Act to Exempt from tax and charges the exhibition of skeleton or fossil remains of animals, and of the fine arts and scientific exhibitions. Whereas, a doubt exists whether under the revenue laws of this State, the exhibition of the skeleton or fossil remains of animals found within the limits of Tennessee, and of specimens of fine painting and sculpture, and of other scientific exhibitions are exempt from taxes and charges.

And whereas, such exhibitions tend to improve the knowledge and taste of a people, and ought not to be discouraged and prohibited-- for remedy thereof,

SECTION 1. Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, That the revenue act, which imposes on all exhibitions for which money is taken, the tax of fifty dollars in each county of this State, be so restricted as not to embrace and include the exhibitions enumerated in this section, and that the exhibition of skeleton or fossil remains of animals, the exhibition of any specimen or specimens of fine painting or of fine sculpture, be and the same are hereby exempted from all taxes and charges whatsoever.

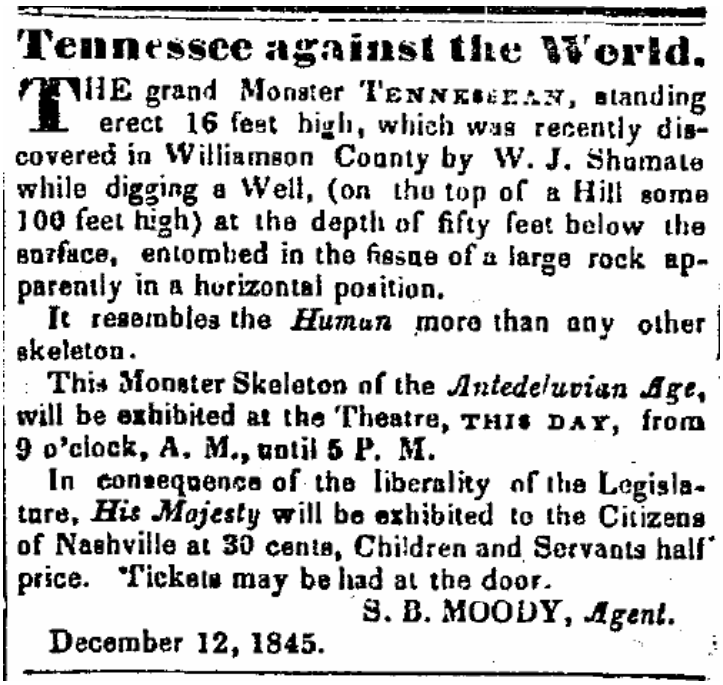
Sec 2. Be it enacted, That the act shall extend only to such exhibitions above enumerated, as are really and in good faith the skeleton or fossil remains of animals, and are specimens of fine painting and sculpture, and shall not exempt any exhibition in which such subjects are used evasively or colorably; and shell not be construed to exempt any of the objects now enumerated in the revenue laws of this State, as feats of activity, slight of hand, wax figures, or shows and such like; Provided, if any thing subject to be taxed, shall be exhibited in connexion with the things herein exempted from taxation, then and in that case, the taxes required by law shall be paid to authorize said exhibitions under the penalties prescribed by law, and it shall be the duty of the Clerks of the County Courts of this State to see that the act shall not be violated, and prosecute all persons violating the same. BROOKINS CAMPBELL, Speaker of the House of Representatives. H.M. Watterson, Speaker of the Senate.

Other newspapers across the nation continued to carry reports of the astounding discovery.

A Giant. The Madison Banner states on authority, that a person in Franklin county [sic], Tennessee, digging, a few weeks since, found a human skeleton at the depth of fifty feet, which measures eighteen feet in length. The

Williamson County Giant, continued....

immense frame was entire with an unimportant exception in one of the extremities. It has been visited by several of the principal members of the medical faculty in Nashville, and pronounced unequivocally, by all, the skeleton was of a huge man. The bone of the thigh measured five feet; and it was computed that the height of the living man, making the property allowance for muscles, must have been at least twenty feet. The finder has been offered eight thousand dollars for it, but had determined not to sell it at any price until exhibiting it for twelve months. He is now having the different parts wired together for this purpose. These unwritten records of the men and animals of other ages, that are often from time to time dug out of the bowels of the earth, put conjecture to confusion, and almost surpass imagination itself. The "bones" must be seen before this story can be believed. *Dwight's American Magazine and Family Newspaper*, 1:632, 1845.



Tennessee against the World.

THE grand Monster TENNESSEAN, standing erect 16 feet high, which was recently discovered in Williamson County by W. J. Shumate while digging a Well, (on the top of a Hill some 100 feet high) at the depth of fifty feet below the surface, entombed in the fissue of a large rock apparently in a horizontal position.

It resembles the *Human* more than any other skeleton.

This Monster Skeleton of the *Antedeluvian Age*, will be exhibited at the Theatre, THIS DAY, from 9 o'clock, A. M., until 5 P. M.

In consequence of the liberality of the Legislature, *His Majesty* will be exhibited to the Citizens of Nashville at 30 cents, Children and Servants half price. Tickets may be had at the door.

S. B. MOODY, *Agent.*

December 12, 1845.

FIGURE 2. Advertisement for the "Monster Tennessean", *Republican Banner* 12 Dec 1845.

By December 12, the surviving parts of the Giant Skeleton had been reassembled and mounted -- with the "missing" parts fleshed out using wood and rawhide. The skeleton was transported to Nashville and placed on display at the Theatre (Figure 2).

The Big Tennessean.-- The citizens of Nashville have enjoyed the opportunity during several days of examining the skeleton of a strange animal, whose bones were found imbedded amidst rocks at the depth of fifty feet below the surface, in the county of Williamson. Many have examined the bones, and all have been interested. Various opinions are expressed as to the species of animal to which it belongs, but all concur in pronouncing it a strange skeleton. In its arrangement for exhibition it presents all the appearance of a human skeleton standing erect and measuring sixteen feet from the top of the skull bone. There was suspended by his side the skeleton of a man or ordinary size, and the contrast was truly striking [Figure 3].

Whatever doubts may be entertained in classifying this animal, there can be none as to the fact connected with its finding and exhumation. It was found at least fifty feet below the surface of the earth, and seemed to be wedged in between two rocks, and many of the large bones are broken as if crushed between the rocks. The pelvis, for instance, is broken and crushes so that it could not be put together, and its place is supplied with wood.--Although several of the important bones are missing, yet in general the corresponding ones are preserved so that a tolerably complete skeleton has been formed.

We are not aware that any scientific gentleman has yet ventured to declare to what species the animal belonged. There are some strong indications that it was a biped animal, but we are unable to discover this-- Nash. paper. *Dwight's American Magazine and Family Newspaper*, 1:776, 1845.

By late December, the exhibition had made its way to New Orleans (also coincidentally the home of the Ethiopian Serenaders) where it met with equal astonishment and continued to make the pages of newspaper across the country through early January:

Jeffersonian Republican, January 8, 1846, pg. 2. **A Monster Skeleton**. The Nashville Whig of Dec. 13th, gives a description of a monster skeleton recently discovered in Williamson county, Tenn., which was entombed in the crevice of a large rock, apparently in a horizontal position. The skeleton, standing erect, measures 16 feet, and resembles that of the human skeleton more than anything else. Gentlemen of intelligence who have seen the fossil remains of Mastodons and other animals exhibited at the eastward, say this is by far the most extraordinary antedeluvian specimen they have ever seen.

Williamson County Giant, continued....

Niles National Register, 3 July 1847. **MISCELLANEOUS DISCOVERIES**. "There were giants in those days" -- Wonderful fossil remains.-- The New Orleans papers speak of a gigantic skeleton of some animal not yet classed, as being now exhibited in that city. We learn from the Times that it stands 16 feet high, and was discovered at a depth of 55 feet below the surface of the earth, in Tennessee. The question is, whether these antediluvian remains belong to a class of animals, homogeneous with the present race of man, or not. No fossil remains of man have yet, we believe, been found; although there is no doubt, according to geologists, that the globe of the earth, since it first became habitable, after losing its incandescent state, has always been the abode of intellectual as well as animal life. [also published version in Trumpet and Universalist Magazine 10 Jul 1847:16).

Alas, the Wonder of the Williamson County Giant was soon to fall prey to an unscrupulous scientist from the Medical College of Louisiana.

American Journal of Science and Arts, 1(2):244. 1846. **ART. XII.-- Remarks on some Fossil Bones recently brought to New Orleans from Tennessee and from Texas; by WILLIAM M. CARPENTER, M.D., Prof. in the Med. Coll. of Louisiana.** I. Fossils from Tennessee- the "gigantic Fossil Man," (being the skeleton of a young mastodon.) Much interest has been recently excited by the announcement of the discovery in Tennessee of the remains of a man eighteen feet high. The papers teemed with accounts of the prodigy, and public confidence was secured by the assertion that the distinguished physicians of the west had testified that they were human remains. About the last of December these remains reached this city; and on the first of January I was requested by a distinguished surgeon here to go with him on the invitation of the proprietor to examine them, and give an opinion. They had been erected in a high room; the skeleton was sustained in its erect position by a large upright beam of timber. At a glance it was apparent that it was nothing more than the skeleton of a young *mastodon*, (one of Godman's Tetracaulodons, with sockets for four tusks.) The bones of the leg and ankle were complete, the metatarsal bones wanting. The bones of the anterior extremities complete to the metacarpal bones, which were present in one leg, the phalanges wanting. Most of the vertebrae were present; the ribs mostly of wood. The pelvic arrangement was entirely of wood; the scapulae were present, but somewhat broken, and were rigged on with a most human-like elevation; pieces of ribs supplying the want of clavicles. The osseous part of the head were portions, nearly complete, of the upper and lower jaws. Some of the molars were quite complete; of the tusks, only one little stump remained, but the four alveoli of the upper jaw had large incisive looking wooden teeth fitted into them, and the lower jaw supplied to correspond. The cranium was entirely wanting from the lower margin of the orbits, back; but a raw-hide cranium was fitted on, which was much more becoming to the animal in his new capacity than the old one would have been.

The artificial construction was principally in the pelvis and head; and take it as thus built it, with its half human, half beast-like look, and its great hooked incisive teeth, it certainly must have conveyed to the ignorant spectator a most horrible idea of a hideous diabolical giant, of which he no doubt dreamed for months. To one informed in such matters it really presented a most ludicrous figure.

The person who had it for exhibition was honest, I believe, in his convictions as to its being the remains of a man, having been confirmed in them by numerous physicians, whose certificates he had in his possession; and having asked and received my opinion, he determined to box it up, never to be exhibited again as the remains of a human being.

In this case, the discovery truly was a giant of the antediluvian world -- the astounding early recovery of a nearly complete mastodon skeleton. Williamson County has produced numerous examples of mastodons over the centuries -- including the internationally famous Coats-Hines site (40WM31) near Cool Springs (Deter-Wolf et al. 2011). Exposure of the mistake was not nearly as widely distributed as the original.

The Ottawa Free Trader April 10, 1846. page 2. The great skeleton giant, nineteen feet high, which was dug up in Tennessee, proves to be the imperfect skeleton of a young mastodon set upright on its hind legs, and, by the aid of artificial substitutes for some of the principal bones, which were wanting, made to assume a moderately human appearance -- Boston Post.

Mechanic's Advocate 25 Feb 1847:101. **HUMBUG-CREDULITY**...We saw it announced last year in "the papers" that a human skeleton, 18 feet in height had been dug up in Tennessee. It was shortly after exhibited through the Mississippi Valley, and found its way to New Orleans, in the hands of a man who had purchased it on speculation. Thousands had seen it; and the owner exhibited hundreds of certificates of Doctors, Surgeons, Clergymen, Lawyers, Gentlemen &c., to the effect that it was a *bona fide* human skeleton.

Williamson County Giant, continued...

> At New Orleans, Prof. Carpenter of the Louisiana Medical College, was requested to call and examine it, which he did; and at the first glance pronounced it - a man? -- no, but the bones of a young mastodon!-- It was standing upright, supported by a beam; the pelvis was artificial, and human of course, in appearance; and as the greater part of the cranium was missing when found, it was no hard matter for the ingenious rogue to fit what was left of it to look like man's, which he accomplished with the aid of a piece of raw hide. When told of the hoax by the Professor; the owner declared he would never exhibit it again; and he probably has not, for its fame has not reached our ears of late, through the columns of the press.

Now "just" a mastodon, the remarkable discovery was apparently quietly packed away and the disposition of the fossils remain unknown (Figure 3).

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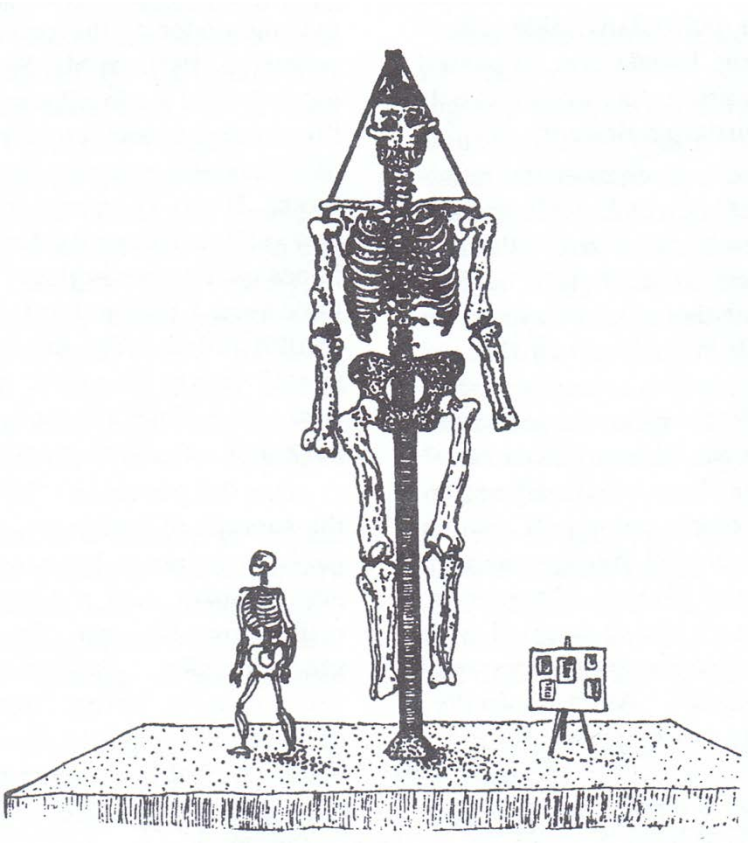

FIGURE 3. The "Giant Tennessean" with normal-sized human skeleton to the left and the multitudes of certificates of authenticity to the right (Corgan and Breitburg 1996, Figure 1).